

"WHAT DOES HE WANT?"
REVELATION 3:14-20
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Among the more familiar words in the New Testament are these: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him." Every-time I hear them my memory transports me to childhood and the Bible School flannel graph that showed a heart with a door on it and Jesus knocking. Or I think of Holman Hunt's very popular painting of a ^{Jesus - at night} ~~serene Christ~~, lantern held in his hand, knocking gently on the door of a rustic cottage. Or I am reminded of a favorite old hymn:

O Jesus, thou art standing
Outside the fast closed door,
In lowly patience waiting
To pass the threshold o'er
O Jesus, thou art pleading
In accents meek and low.

As is often the case, however, the images we attach to the words, and the interpretation we read in, ^{are} ~~is~~ the products of American pietism - masquerading as real, old-time Bible theology, and bears little resemblance to the obvious intent of the Biblical text. In this case, I would suggest, the tradition surrounding the text is an outright distortion.

Let's look more carefully. The Book of Revelation was written by an exiled political prisoner by the name of John. Because he was an articulate Christian the Roman political establishment saw fit to ship him out to the lonely island of Patmos. From there - he wrote a political polemic against his captors using wild imagery and secret symbolism. Christians ever since have been trying to ^{squeeze} ~~force~~ their own political biases into John's symbols with varying degrees of success - all of them irrelevant. In any case, he began his book using the form of Christ himself speaking ^{- dictating letters} to the seven churches in Asia Minor. In his prologue to the letters he describes his vision of Christ... "a son of man, clothed with a long robe and a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace..."

Now that's not exactly what I have in mind when I think of Jesus knocking at the door. And it becomes more disturbing. Addressing the church in Laodicea he says: "I know your works: you are neither hot nor cold. Would that you were cold or hot! So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth... Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten..." And then - after all of that... "Behold, I stand at the door and

knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me..."

The issue in the Laodicean church was the same matter that got John of Patmos in hot water in the first place: namely the Roman insistence on emperor worship. For ^{the Romans} ~~them~~ it was a matter of patriotism and loyalty for every subject to recognize the divinity of the emperor and to swear ultimate fealty to the state. Consequently, it was a matter of treasonous civil disobedience for Christians to refuse. The good folk of Laodicea, it seems, were trying to play it both ways: essentially to remain neutral. Their lukewarmness, that is so offensive to Christ, is precisely in their reluctance to be controversial, to take a stand, to risk their security and material well being for their faith.

Three preliminary conclusions jump out at us. This message - "Behold I stand and knock" is addressed to a church - not to individuals. It is not a plea to open your heart to Jesus in order to be saved so much as it is an urgent demand to get up and get moving. - to be what you claim to be. And finally - my impression of it all - if we must visualize it - is not at all a gentle Christ tapping on the door - pleading in accents meek and low: but a potent, virile Lord pounding on the door in broad daylight.

That I would suggest, is a little more in line with what's happening in the Bible than the tepid, favorite image, dear to our hearts, of the Lord Jesus seeking access to human lives. He wants in all right - but he's pounding, and he's demanding and he's got something more in mind than a private sense of salvation.

We've come a long way from that: there is today a division across Christendom between denominations, within denominations and within congregations between what may be called the pietists and the social activists. Pietists, on the one hand, see the purpose of Christian faith as the saving of souls. Jesus is regarded in terms of a gentle savior who wants admission to the human heart for the purpose of personal salvation. When it stops there - and it usually does - it is simply unbiblical: you can't read the Bible with integrity and defend it. Unfortunately, people who take this position usually know more about the Bible than anyone else and are able to overwhelm the average skeptic with proof texts. The result is that they claim - and most agree - that their position is Biblical Christianity: that when preaching, for instance, deals with anything other than how to get to heaven it is

apostate: and that when the church corporato addresses itself in word or deed to the world, it has become dangerous, politicized, heretical and maybe even leftist.

The other side of the divide belongs to the Social Activists. The purpose of Christian faith for these people is to bring about a utopia on earth: to provide remedies for all of mankind's ills: hunger, poverty, over-population, pollution, oppression, sexism, racism. Christ becomes revolutionary: the Church - a breeding ground for political ferment. And the Bible - social activists don't pay much attention to the Bible except those passages that deal with their social agenda.

This has been a caricature of the two positions, to be sure. People aren't that easily categorized. And yet the division is a real one across the church. It's one we feel in our hearts and one that many of us wish could be resolved. Both positions contain truth: both can quote the Bible ad nauseum to prove their point. Each needs the sensitivities of the other if the end product is to be called Biblical.

Pietists need to stop ignoring the whole prophetic tradition and start paying attention to the Biblical concern for justice and peace. Pietists need to look at the worldly Christ of the New Testament who did engage in civil disobedience and did identify with the poor and oppressed people around him. And Social activists need to stop ignoring the God of the 23rd Psalm, the pastoral, fatherly God who knows his children by name, who stoops to bind up their wounds. Activists need to come to terms with the intensely personal Christ of the New Testament whose purpose was not limited to social righteousness - but who did set men free from sin and for eternal salvation.

And it all drives us back beyond the immediacy of the debate: back beyond our current position on abortion: beyond our childhood theologies to the really fundamental question: "What does he want?" Assuming that God in Christ is knocking at the door - the door of our heart - our homes - our church - what is it that he wants of us?

The Bible gives us two answers both of which are necessary. He wants us - and he wants his will done in the world. And you just can't have one without the other. Moses for instance - "Go down Moses - to Egypt land - tell ole Pharaoh - let my people go." God came to Moses - out there in the pasture near Horeb. God knocked on the door - barged right in, in fact and gave Moses an experience he'd never forget. But the purpose of it all was not

just to get Moses' attention - or to save his soul, although that happened in the process. God, the account reads, saw the affliction of his people, heard their cry for help, knew and felt their suffering and was inclined to do something about it: to set them free to be precise: free in an very political and economic and judicial and social sense. And Moses was the one assigned to do it.

That kind of thing keeps happening in the Bible. People are saved - in order to serve. Salvation in the Bible always gets people involved with other people - usually suffering people in sticky, controversial awkward and very worldly situations. David, Samuel, Saul, Amos, Ezekiel, Isaiah - none of them particularly relished the idea of going in the name of the Lord. All of them would have much preferred tending their sheep or dressing the vineyards in the certain knowledge of their own personal salvation.

Leslie Newbigin put it in very concise words: "Peter and Andrew and James and John are not portrayed as mystics seeking the true religion and finding it in the teaching of Jesus. They are rather shown as men picked by a commander for an expedition, a task force rather than a study group or holy club." Then turning to us he says, "The church has constantly forgotten this. It has listened to the words 'Come unto me' but not listened to the words 'Go - I will be with you'. It has interpreted conversion as if it was simply a turning toward God for purposes of one's own private inner religious life, instead of seeing conversion as it is in the Bible, a turning toward God for the doing of his will in the secular world." (Honest Religion for Secular Man, Page 100-101)

What does he want? He wants us and he wants his will done in the world. That's the way it's always been. In Laodicea, where he knocked on the door - he wanted in - he wanted people to believe in him and trust him and have faith in them - and he wanted them to do it by taking a rather unpopular stand on an issue that was purely political. In Moses' case - he wanted Moses' heart - but also his body. He wanted Moses' ability to relieve the very real suffering of his people.

He wants us to be saved - and the means he gives us for realizing our salvation is the need of other people. Paul saw that and wrote it beautifully - "If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." And a verse from the First Letter of John -

- a verse I've read many times but really discovered just this week - "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death" (1 John 3:14-15)

Reflexively - this type of effort severely outwitted

The means to our salvation - other people's need? God calling us in the cry for help from a brother? It's an intriguing thought. Ordinarily we do our good works in the world as a kind of afterthought to our religion. In terms of a local congregation, community action is not exactly the highest priority on the agenda. Yet the Bible holds up love - loving activity in the world as the way Christians seize their salvation. When we do it, we are inclined to buttress it with theologies of self-sacrifice and cross-carrying. But the Bible suggests that the reward of salvation is granted as we love. Self-fulfillment happens when we begin to serve and help. "For we pass from death to life as we love the brethren."

That's the really sad part of all of this. Young, alive, sensitive and courageous people are rejecting Christianity because they've seen that much of what goes under the name stops with the individual. They've seen us in our well-appointed sanctuaries, sitting smugly, piously sure of our salvation, unconcerned about the major problems bothering society and they've concluded that Christianity is irrelevant. And they're right. Faith that stops with me is irrelevant. In fact it isn't Christian Faith at all. For the Gospel is the call of Jesus Christ to open the door - to receive the gift of salvation - and then bravely to live it by serving others in the world.

There is nothing "lukewarm" about it. Christian faith lived in the world is hot, full of passion: enthusiastic, urgent. And yet, one has to grant that the 1970's have given birth to an insipid "lukewarmness" about a lot of things. So much has happened to us in a decade that many people lost nerve. Civil Rights - which began with the church - came and went. So did the New Frontier and the War on Poverty - which we lost, by the way. And people today, in the words of William Sloane Coffin are scrambling to become Charter members of "The Association of Life's Bystanders." Right now we'd settle for a little better price on sirloin and the assurance that we'll have enough gasoline this winter.

Langdon Gilkey, in a piercing commentary on life in the 70's notes: "...when there is nothing significant in our lives, existence becomes a treadmill leading nowhere, a mere

succession of rote acts; of commuting in the subway, opening letters, making out orders, typing someone else's correspondence, sweeping a floor, digging a ditch... and then at the end of the day eating another meal and brushing your teeth. In a world of meaningless acts, there is neither self, world, nor future." (Naming the White Wind P. 347)

We're combatting the lukewarmness of life, Gilkey suggests, with the holy trinity of sex, booze, and success. But it doesn't work. Life remains empty. Sex becomes a contest instead of a celebration; booze a poor crutch and success nothing more than a "solid gold trap."

Your salvation is out there in the form of someone who needs you; someone who needs your love and attention and skill and the special gifts which you alone possess. The world needs the witness of the United Presbyterian Church; this community needs the ministry of Bethany Presbyterian Church; and someone needs you.

But most of all - ~~you~~ ^{on the door} - we - need the salvation that loving the brethren promises. You see, in the final analysis Christ knocks and calls us - not to self debasement, not even to sacrifice really; but to self fulfillment; to fulness of life; wholeness, completeness - salvation. In giving we do receive; in loving we do become the crown of creation; in serving others - on a grand scale, or simply - personally - intimately - we do taste a little of God's eternal kingdom.

That's what he wants. That's the call and the promise

"Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him..."

"We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren."

There's a banquet waiting for those who love. Call it fulness of life. Call it a party. Call it life in the Spirit. Call it salvation. AMEN

Father, give us ears to hear your voice as it comes through the cries of those in need. Give us grace to live and love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN